

The New Republic Dec 26, 1964 "The Editors" (Alan Berg)

For the Child Who Has Nothing

At an international conference held at the National Academy of Sciences in Washington a small group of doctors, scientists and scholars from 20 countries met to talk about young children – the one-to-five age group – in the so-called developing countries. These pre-school youngsters constitute 25 percent of the two billion population of these nations (compared to less than 10 percent of the population in this country), and the nutritionists tell us that seven of every ten of them suffer from some form of malnutrition. Papers presented at the conference also said that malnutrition permanently impairs physical growth and that there is now strong evidence that malnutrition and irreparable mental retardation are related. The specialists say that unless it is stemmed, the growing incidence of malnutrition will have a major effect on "what our civilization looks, thinks and acts like – in 1984."

The scientists are speaking, of course, of those who are strong enough to survive. Up to half the children in these countries never make it to their fifth birthdays, a mortality rate some 60 times higher than in more affluent societies. Were the death rate in the pre-

school age group in Latin America as it is in our country, for example, almost a third of a million fewer youngsters would die every year. Still more graphic, in a country like Libya a mother must have five children to be reasonably certain that one will ever reach the age of 15; and in Vietnam, the cumulative mortality approaches 40 percent with four years of life. This is a proportion of deaths which is not reached until age 60 in the United States.

As if these figures are not striking enough, the highly regarded Mexican nutritionist Dr. Joaquin Cravioto says, "The true picture of child mortality due to malnutrition is still understated." Reason for such "understatement" may well be the unscientific tabulation of mortality rates. According to Dr. Cecily Williams, the grand British lady who keynoted the conference, the job of registering deaths is often left to policemen and postmasters. "In Malaya," she says, "the police had the responsibility of registering uncertified deaths. In one rural area it was found that deaths under the age of three were blamed on 'convulsions' or 'crying convulsions'. Those between three and 30 were usually

ascribed to 'fever', and over 30 to 'senility'."

It was Dr. Williams, incidentally, who many years ago in Africa first described the symptoms of child malnutrition and tagged to it the name of "*kwashiorkor*." This word from the Ga dialect in West Africa means "the sickness the older baby gets when the new baby comes." When the older child is replaced by the new baby at the mother's breast, the lack of a suitable diet soon makes the first child irritable and listless. Professor Ritchie Calder of the University of Edinburgh, another participant in this month's conference, says: "The most saddening experience I know is to look into the eyes of *kwashiorkor*; it is like looking into a dark lantern, in which the glint of childhood is unlit. The muscles waste, the skin cracks and scales, like peeling stucco on a wall. The hair loses its pigment. . . . Liver damage almost always occurs. If the child survives its third year, as an untreated case, it will go through life permanently damaged, with its mental and physical development impaired."

This growth retardation, according to studies conducted in 15 countries by the National Institutes of Health, is approximately 20 to 30 percent. This means that by the time the child reaches the age of 12, he has the physical development of a normal eight year old.

Just as serious in the eyes of the nutritionists as growth retardation is that malnutrition lowers resistance against infection. And once he is infected, the malnourished child is of course more susceptible to severe disease. The death rate due to measles in Guatemala, for example, is 228 times greater than in the United States. In Ecuador, it is 325 times greater.

Not too long ago, the matter of "pre-school malnutrition" (a misleading professional label, since most of the children have no schools to be "pre" to) kept only the nutritionists and pediatricians awake at night. In recent years, however, it has been giving insomnia to others also.

The technical know-how exists to overcome the problem. In Mexico, for example, where increased attention is being given to small children, pre-school deaths dropped 57 percent in a decade. Some forward momentum is now sensed by many of the scientists. As suggested by one of the delegates in Washington, "We no longer seem to be trying to walk 'up' the 'down' escalator."

A number of conclusions are emerging, most of a long-range nature. These include nutrition education programs ("the way to a young child's stomach is through its mother's mind—and this is frequently blocked by grandma"), control of food wastage ("food loss in India due to rats, insects, poor storage and fungi amounts annually to three times the food deficit there"), and, of course, family planning ("every year, India increases its population an equivalent to the size

of Greater New York").

Unfortunately, the current problems can't all wait for long-range solutions. Of the many approaches discussed by the experts, it was apparent that one of the easiest, quickest and least-expensive steps would be to fortify and further enrich the massive quantities of food already being shipped to the needy abroad through America's Food For Peace Program. As part of this program, up to 75 million children are every day given some form of food supplement, much of this through CARE and the religious charitable agencies. However, "the nutritive value of these foods," according to Food For Peace Director Reuter (a former director of CARE himself), "could be considerably enhanced with simple vitamin fortification of the non-fat dry milk, and increased enrichment of the flour. Since the law creating this program was originally passed primarily as a surplus disposal measure," Mr. Reuter said, "no legislative authority exists to use additional funds to give our food the needed boost."

A recent NIH study suggests that in East Pakistan alone, 50,000 infants every year are blind for life because of Vitamin A deficiency. In Indonesia, the disease is said to "assume enormous proportions," with hundreds of thousands of children having markedly impaired vision. Vitamin A deficiency is reportedly "widespread," and "a grave threat to sight and survival."

One of the towering figures in this field, Dr. Nevin Scrimshaw of MIT, points out that to provide skim milk to areas already short in Vitamin A serves only to exaggerate the already existing nutritional imbalance. "The United States by sending skim milk to such areas," he says, "runs the risk of precipitating acute Vitamin A deficiency and even blindness. This would be both inhumane and politically dangerous."

"We in the United States have it within our power to prevent this kind of thing from happening," said Vice President-elect Hubert Humphrey in one of his final floor statements as a member of the Senate. One of the originators and long one of the staunchest supporters of Food For Peace, Senator Humphrey told his colleagues: "We can do this at a very minor cost. . . . We ought to find a way to make this minor adjustment in our Public Law 480 program [Food For Peace] to fortify our donated foods. . . ."

The cost has been estimated, for milk as an example, at two one-hundredths of one cent per child per day. Over a year-long period, this comes to something less than seven cents per child for enough Vitamin A and D in his milk to prevent possible blindness, to check rickets (a Vitamin D deficiency which affects the bone structure of up to 50 percent of children in certain tropical countries), and increase resistance to infection.

Food For Peace Director Reuter points out that aside from the obvious moral concerns related to such an is-

sue, the US aid program has developed foreign markets for US farmers (Japan is now the US farmers' chief overseas customer), but "how can we expect a mother to buy American milk for her child when she can buy fortified milk from other countries at the same price?"

Senator Humphrey has suggested that we must weigh the cost of fortifying our Food For Peace donations against the costs which may result from the consequences if we don't. "In East Pakistan alone," he says, "we are speaking of 50,000 potential invalids in one year in one small part of one country, who may well end up requiring some type of major welfare as-

sistance. To the budget of that country - and the budget of this country which through its aid program supports that country - it seems a reasonable investment to spend pennies to prevent this kind of thing."

Such fortification and enrichment of our Food For Peace donations is by no means the answer to the problem of malnutrition among so-called pre-school children, but according to Mr. Reuter, "it is a good step in that direction. We can feed them all we want when they're six years old - but by then it may well be too late; the damage has been done. Their tomorrows depend on today."

THE EDITORS